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ABSTRACT

Hardiness has been defined as a mediator in life stress and, within the health/illness context, has been conceptualized as a personality characteristic. This study used a descriptive exploratory design to examine the concept of hardiness among elderly women. The Stress, Appraisal, and Coping model developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1986) was the organizing framework for the study. The Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale Scale was administered to 24 women between the ages of 67 and 91, and in-depth guided interviews that explored a stressful event and individual responses to the event were conducted with all subjects. Demographic information was also obtained. The findings suggest that most subjects were able to adapt successfully, to continue to have a life purpose, and to restore balance to their lives following a major loss. Five dimensions of hardiness were identified: equanimity, self-efficacy, perseverance, meaningfulness, and existential aloneness. The hardy individual may be able to mobilize coping resources more successfully and use appropriate emotion- and problem-focused coping responses. Subjects were able to cope with stressful events as evidenced by their successful adaptations and high levels of morale. Hardiness may contribute to an understanding of appraisal, coping responses, and adaptation. (Author/NB)

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HARDINESS AMONG ELDERLY WOMEN

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HARDINESS AMONG ELDERLY WOMEN

The purpose of this research was to explore the concept of hardiness among elderly women. Hardiness has been defined as a mediator in life stress and, within the health/illness context, has been conceptualized as a personality characteristic. A descriptive exploratory design was used. Indepth interviews with 24 women between the ages of 67 and 91 were conducted in six senior citizen centers. Because there may be an association between hardiness and morale, the Philadephia Geriatric Center Morale Scale (PGCMS) was administered together with a guided interview that explored a stressful event and individual responses to the event. The Stress, Appraisal, and Coping model developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1986) was the organizing framework for this study. Findings suggested that most subjects were able to adapt successfully, continue to have a life purpose, and restore balance to their lives following a major loss. Five dimensions of hardiness were identified: equanimity, self-efficacy, perseverance, meaningfulness, and existential aloneness. The hardy individual may be able to mobilize coping resources more successfully and use appropriate emotion- and problem-focused coping responses. Subjects in this study were able to cope with stressful events as evidenced by their successful adaptations and high levels of morale. Thus, hardiness may contribute to an understanding of appraisal, coping responses, and adaptation. A 25-item tool to measure hardiness was also developed.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Stress, Appraisal, and Coping Model developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1986) serves as a conceptual framework for the study of hardiness. These authors propose that an individual is presented with an event, appraises this event as irrelevant, positive, or stressful and, if stressful, begins the coping process. This process is further divided into emotion- and problem-focused coping responses with the former referring to regulating the emotional response to the event, and the latter, managing the event itself. This model includes several factors that could account for the variability in individual response such as the nature and timing of the event, external and internal resources, and the coping repertoire of the individual. We propose that hardiness influences appraisal and coping responses and can serve as a coping resource. Thus hardiness may facilitate successful adaptation.

METHODS

Given the lack of knowledge in hardiness among elderly women, a grounded theory approach was indicated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The value of this approach for this study was that hardiness and its underlying dimensions were identified and described as they existed within this sample.

Sample

A convenience sampling method was used. Directors of six senior citizen centers were asked to post a notice recruiting potential subjects for a study that explores how elderly women

manage difficult life events. Interested subjects were contacted and a convenient time and place was established for an interview.

Data Collection

Two investigators tape-recorded interviews with twelve subjects each. All subjects were asked to respond to the same set of questions, but the interview was flexible enough that the subjects also could talk freely about their lives. Data were gathered at only one point in time.

Instruments

Demographic information (age, marital status, education, living situation, and self reports of physical health history), a measure of morale using the Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale Scale (Lawton, 1975), and responses to 14 open-ended questions related to a stressful life event were obtained. The measure of morale was included as an outcome indicator of hardiness.

Guided Interview

Each subject was asked to recall one salient event which was particularly difficult or crucial. The questions were designed to elicit information about individual characteristics associated with the experience of a major life stressor. Subjects were also asked to identify factors which they perceived as important in their general management of stress.

GUIDED INTERVIEW

1. Please describe an event that has been difficult, stressful, perhaps left you feeling overwhelmed, required many changes in your way of life, challenged you in a new way.
2. How did you respond when that event occurred?

3. What else was going on in your life when this event occurred?
4. How have your feelings changed since then?
5. Were you ready/prepared for the event?
6. Did you feel that you had any control over the event?
7. What did you do to handle the event?
8. Was this how you had managed problems before?
9. Who did you turn to for help? Any one else? Was that person(s) able to help?
10. How has your life changed as a result of this event?
11. In light of all of these changes, how do you feel about life right now?
12. If you were to think of some of the hard times in your life, what would you say got you through?
13. What do you think a hardy person is?
14. Do you see yourself as a hardy person?

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were in the form of narrative text derived from transcribed interviews and in composite scores from the Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale Scale. Together, the investigators coded the data using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initially the data were organized according to broad focus areas corresponding to interview questions, including initial and secondary responses to the event, strategies used to cope with difficult times, and subjects' descriptions of a hardy person. These focus areas were analyzed individually for categories of response. Comparison of

responses generated theoretical properties within each focus area. Many categories were identified in the initial stages of the analysis. As more information was compiled on each focus area, the categories were collapsed into major themes which reflected the attributes of the hardy person. These themes were then compared with the categories generated by the subjects' descriptions of the hardy person. In this way the attributes of the hardy person were recognized which facilitated the identification of the underlying dimensions of this personality characteristic.

Interrater reliability in coding the transcribed interviews was enhanced through the development of clearly defined categories where possible (i.e. initial response to the event). The investigators worked closely together to compare categories of responses and to ensure that emerging dimensions of hardiness were in agreement.

INSTRUMENT TESTING

The Hardiness Scale is a 25-item instrument that was developed from a qualitative study in which twenty-four hardy women (actively involved in senior centers and displaying zest for life) were interviewed in depth. Five dimensions that characterized these hardy women were identified: 1) self-efficacy; 2) perseverance; 3) meaningfulness; 4) equanimity; and (5) existential aloneness. Sub-scales reflecting these five dimensions were constructed using verbatim statements made by the subjects that exemplified each category. An initial instrument using 50 items was pilot tested in a group of 31 undergraduate

students. Items with little variance as shown by frequency distributions were eliminated. The instrument was further refined to increase internal consistency and reliability resulting in a 25-item scale with an overall Cronbach's alpha of

research populations: 50 students entering a graduate degree program; 50 female caregivers of Alzheimer's patients; and 60 women re-entering the workforce following the birth of a child.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION
(N = 24)

AGE:	67 TO 91 years (mean age = 78.1)
MARITAL STATUS:	Widowed - 16
	Married - 7
	Divorced - 1
EDUCATION:	< 12 years - 4
	12 years - 8
	> 12 years - 12
HEALTH:	Excellent - 5
	Very Good - 8
	Good - 7
	Fair - 3
	Poor - 1
MORALE (PGCMS):	Mean score - 12.29 (S.D. - 3.74)

RESULTS OF QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Loss was universally identified as the major event by the subjects. Eighteen described the loss of a significant person in their lives (spouse - 12; child - 6). Two described the loss

associated with relocation and one of employment. The remaining three identified the loss of their health as a recent major event.

Subjects were asked what helped them manage the event. Several stated that the most helpful thing to do was to just 'keep going,' and many stated that continued or renewed involvement with activities or work was most helpful. Spiritual and/or social support was identified as being helpful for the majority.

When asked what helped subjects in general 'get through hard times,' spiritual faith and an acceptance that loss is part of life were identified. Activities such as gardening, exercise, music and art, community involvement, and travel were identified by all subjects as being helpful in managing difficult times. Again, friends and family played a significant role. Positive comparison and a valuing of self (i.e. appearance and positive self-regard) were also strategies identified by subjects.

DIMENSIONS OF HARDINESS

The constant comparative method yielded five underlying dimensions of hardiness.

Conceptual definitions of these dimensions are as follows:

Equanimity - a balanced perspective of one's life and experiences. Subjects who portrayed equanimity expressed this quality in statements such as 'There are some things you just have to learn to live with.'

Perseverance - the act of persistence despite adversity or discouragement. Examples of subjects' statements reflecting

perseverance include 'You just have to keep on going.'

Self-efficacy - the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcome (Bandura, 1977). An example of this quality is 'I'm used to meeting things head-on.'

Meaningfulness - the realization that life has a purpose and the valuation of one's contributions. Subjects exhibiting this quality stated 'Keeping interested in things is very important to me.'

Existential Aloneness - the realization that each person's life path is unique; while some experiences are shared, there reamin others that must be faced alone. An example of this quality included 'There are some things that are just up to me to do; no one else can do them for me.'

SUMMARY

- In general the subjects were healthy, actively involved in their communities, and reported a high level of morale. One might conjecture that since morale is often viewed as an outcome measure and hardiness is a personality characteristic developed over time, that a higher level of morale may be one positive result of the more enduring hardy personality.
- Findings indicate that most subjects were able to adapt successfully, continue to have a life purpose, and restore balance to their lives following a major loss. Subjects did not consider the event itself as an opportunity for growth, but reported personal growth and development of self as they adapted to the loss. With the passage of time, subjects were able to view the event against the backdrop of their total life

experiences.

- Viewed within the study's framework, hardiness is seen both as an enduring personality characteristic that influences appraisal, and as an internal coping resource. The hardy individual may be able to mobilize coping resources more efficiently and therefore adapt more readily to new situations.

- Traditional outcomes of the coping process have emphasized physical health. Individuals who are hardy have the capacity to withstand hardships and are able to adapt to and derive meaning from the stressful events in their lives. Hardy older persons may suffer physical decline, but nevertheless warrant recognition for effective coping.

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